

Original Article

Beyond the Classroom: Exploring the Motivational Impact of Globalization on EFL Learners

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Abstract

Globalization positions English as a gateway to digital culture, professional participation, and geographic mobility, yet its motivational resonance for individual learners remains under-described. This qualitative study explored the impact of globalization on motivation among three EFL Learners studying English as a foreign language in a language center. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Two interlocking themes emerged. Personal motivation centred on the desire to engage directly with global industry, self-actualization and to construct a cosmopolitan identity. Professional motivation reflected perceptions of English as essential for employment, networking, and academic competitiveness in multinational contexts. The themes collectively depict a layered motivational ecology in which intrinsic curiosity and instrumental aspirations reinforce one another, yet are accompanied by anxiety over native-speaker benchmarks. The findings enrich current literature by illuminating how globalization shapes motivation at an individual level paving way for professional goals within a linguistically diverse Global South setting, contributing to Pakistani scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

Language education systems have been significantly influenced by globalization, most notably in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), since English has become more prevalent globally as a dominant Lingua Franca, a substantial shift in the motivation factor of language learners is noticeable. While earlier models like Gardner's (1985) integrative-instrumental theory are still widely used, they are now coexisting with more recent approaches that consider the impact of digitalization, cultural diversity, and economic imperatives. Language learners are increasingly motivated by the benefits that can be attained by gaining English Language fluency, like access to higher studies and international career opportunities (Graddol, 2006). However, in some contexts, resistance to acquiring the language is observed due to the perceived ideologies that it can be a threat to local and regional languages (Pennycook, 2017).

Research suggests that globalization provides EFL students more access to English language media, digital learning tools to English because it opens up new avenues to media, online learning, and worldwide communication (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Lamb, 2017). Platforms like social media and online music/video sites bring together global users and support linking language learning to practical experiences (Henry et al., 2019). Yet, because of globalization, students in challenging environments may feel stressed about language skills, seeing them only as a way to achieve success, which in turn can negatively affect motivation and self-confidence (Papi & Hiver, 2020; Kormos & Csizér, 2014). This unequal access to technology because of the digital divide leads to differences in learning chances for students (Warschauer, 2017). Students who have more financial support may learn through high-tech platforms, but students in under-resourced areas find it hard to stay motivated (Selwyn, 2019). Additionally, treating English as a global economic resource might cause students to care more about tests and employment than developing good communication skills (Jenkins, 2015; Phillipson, 2018). Studies indicate that

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as standardized tests become common (often due to globalization), students' own enthusiasm for learning can suffer as a result of more emphasis on memorizing language than using it (Butler, 2018).

Globalization of culture has a major role in influencing EFL motivation by changing learners' self-image. Multilingualism can allow students to identify themselves as part of a world community (Ushioda, 2017). On the other hand, people tend to reject English due to worries about linguistic imperialism; this, in turn, leads some of them to feel negative and even doubtful about learning the language (Pennycook, 2017). According to studies carried out in East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, motivation is affected by how important English is in the local education system and society (Yashima et al., 2016; Ryan & Irie, 2014). Showing that English is useful for meeting international friends rather than treating it as an obligatory subject in school encourages Japanese students more (Yashima, 2009). According to researchers, involving students in projects, international communication, and digital media helps them stay interested in English (Dooly & Sadler, 2020). Thus, policymakers should take steps to deal with inequality to make sure everyone benefits from globalization. To fully understand globalization's impact on EFL motivation, one must acknowledge that it can help and hinder students' interest in learning.

Therefore the current study is guided by the following research question:

RQ 1: How do English-as-a-foreign-language learners perceive and experience the influence of globalization on their motivation to learn English?

Theoretical Framework

Globalization has influenced the way modern theories think about second language motivation. Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, which centers around learners' future selves, was updated by Ushioda (2020) with a person-in-context relational framework. It illustrates that learners' motivations are influenced by the ongoing changes happening in our society, economy, and technology. Simultaneously, people use critical perspectives to question common motivational ideas. The theory proposed by Norton (2015) claims that what leads people to decide to learn a language is mainly determined by relationships of authority, identity negotiation, and social characteristics, not just by psychological issues. Experts in decolonial studies argue that because of globalization, Western motivational theories may only be practical in places where certain language varieties are prioritized. It is now more commonly acknowledged that motivation in EFL depends on wider social and political influences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Globalization and its Effects

Digital tools have given English language learners new opportunities, but they also point to existing differences. Research shows that social media platforms are now more important in influencing EFL motivation. It was found in a Brazilian study that using Instagram often led to students being more actively involved than they were in traditional lessons. Many participants believed that using real English content and talking to people online in English helped them understand how the language applied to what they did regularly. Still, these digital tools are not available to everyone equally. Reports from rural Malaysian schools explain that inadequate networks and not enough devices make it difficult for students to practice their new language skills. A number of students in these environments felt upset when realizing how much better urban students' access to online tools was. These results indicate that digital globalization may open new opportunities for motivation but might lead to greater educational disparities.

Economic Pressures and Changing Motivation

The global job market's growing demand for English proficiency has significantly influenced EFL students' motivations. Tracking working professionals in South Korea for ten years revealed that those with better English test results had better careers and much higher income. It is similarly common in Gulf countries that migrant workers rely on their English skills to get a job. Due to this, financial experts use the term "IELTS industrial complex" to describe it. Examining test study materials discovered that mainstream types of English were favored over other dialects. Many students mention feeling worried about taking these important tests which shape both their schooling and jobs. I see that the skills gained through English can be useful economically but could result in not really learning how to speak or write the language well.

Cultural Exchange and Identity Negotiation

Global cultural flows have introduced new dimensions to EFL motivation. Studies of K-pop fans in various countries demonstrate how popular culture can drive language learning. Participants reported analyzing song lyrics, engaging with international fan communities, and consuming related media—all of which provided meaningful exposure to authentic English use. However, globalization's cultural impacts are not universally positive. Research in Bangladesh found that substantial numbers of university students resist English-medium instruction, viewing it as a form of cultural imposition. Similar tensions have been documented in other postcolonial contexts, where English is sometimes associated with historical oppression. These findings highlight the complex relationship between language learning and identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Cultural Identity and Resistance to Linguistic Imperialism

One result of English being dominant worldwide is that some learners embrace speaking additional languages, while others reject what they see as attempts to make English the only language. In Norton's (2013) view, EFL students shape their own identities and contest issues of power when they learn. Due to the history of colonialism, students in India and Nigeria sometimes look at English with ambivalence or a challenging attitude (Pennycook, 2017). In Japan and South Korea, mastering English tends to be linked to being respected internationally and motivates people to continue learning (Yashima, 2009). Ushioda (2017) points out that keeping a connection to their language while using English can maintain learners' motivation for a longer period.

Gender and Globalization in Language Learning

Globalization has affected EFL motivation in ways that are seen differently between male and female learners, as research has found. Studies report that while female students tend to take up learning English because of its social and cultural benefits, males tend to focus more on improving their careers (Kissau, 2012). Such unevenness may result from society putting pressure on women to focus on social skills and on men to learn English to do well in business (Pavlenko & Piller, 2008). In Japanese universities, Kobayashi's (2013) study showed that female students mostly watched or read English-language media for themselves, but male students concentrated on improving field-specific words. This agrees with findings from sociolinguists, showing that women normally pick up new ways of talking and writing (e.g., code-switching, slang) more quickly than men, since they see these skills as important for social advancement (Piller & Takahashi, 2006).

Even so, in societies where women have more restrictions on moving and using the internet, their motivation can be reduced, as exemplified by how male rather than female students report greater confidence in communicating internationally in English in Saudi Arabia (Alrabai, 2016). Inequalities are amplified in the global job market. Many studies indicate that women migrant workers in caregiving professions strive to learn English for social reasons, compared to men who work in construction or engineering, who focus on practical use (Lorente, 2017). Likewise, working as call center employees in India, women are stressed about how well their speech neutralizes local accents because gender often becomes a focus (Cowie, 2007).

Different motivations in digital are rooted in gender differences. Even though women are the main users of HelloTalk for language exchange, men commonly join MOOCs for certificate programs (Lee, 2020). These studies imply that globalization can offer more access to learning English but does not eliminate gender inequality in motivation. This issue calls for teaching practices that value and include various sources of motivation (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004).

The Psychology of Globalized Language Learning: Applying Self-Determination Theory to EFL Contexts

In a globalized environment, the psychological factors of learning a second language have grown more complicated and SDT gives helpful advice on how EFL students maintain their drive. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), SDT states that having autonomy, competence and relatedness fulfilled supports people to be intrinsically motivated. The links between countries cause these needs to be both disrupted and supported by globalization in their own ways today. Learning a new language is now more self-directed because of the digital revolution. Learning platforms like YouTube, apps for exchanging languages and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) offer students the chance to learn on their own terms. According to a study by Vesselinov and Grego (2016), allowing learners to pick lessons of interest to them in accordance with travel, pop culture or professional needs motivates them more and makes them much more likely to stay with Duolingo for a longer period. Nonetheless, having such autonomy is often difficult in educational systems based on standardized tests and strict curricula, especially in

cultures that make test results very important like South Korea and China. According to Kim (2019), the emphasis on exams among Korean EFL students often leads to them being motivated only by requirements and reluctant to enjoy or get creative with English.

The worldwide effort to see English as a key indicator of understanding makes learners face a challenging mental situation. One advantage is that new technologies, including AI writers, voice training apps and translation tools, help everyone develop skills. Godwin-Jones (2018) explains that digital tools can improve students' feeling of achievement and progress. On the other hand, the continuous presence of native speaker models in global media has led to a myth called "the ideal native speaker" by Boo et al. (2015) which may cause learners to feel less confident. It becomes very clear in intermediate studies, where language comparison shows that fluent speakers are much better than non-native language users on TED Talks or English-language YouTube. It becomes worse when social media displays professionally selected language which contributes to what Zhang (2021) explains as "comparative competence anxiety" among Chinese EFL learners. As a result, some learners may stay unmotivated even as they make good progress with their language skills. Virtual communities made possible by globalization have greatly altered how people learn languages and see their relationships in the field of language learning psychology. The development of international interest groups like K-pop groups and networking networks has allowed learners of a new language to connect with others in genuine ways. In their research from 2019, Sauro and Zourou pointed out that being part of online fan groups can aid in keeping up motivation by encouraging meaningful connections and a feeling of being part of something larger. At the same time, having these relationships in a digital format leads to new mental challenges. Japanese students taking part in online language exchange programs sometimes feel a conflict between wanting real interactions and being concerned about how they look on the internet (Yamazaki, 2020). This kind of relationship can result in anxiety and tiredness, mostly when learners are required to use language and culture appropriately in every online exchange.

The psychological effects of English becoming a main international language depend on the particular context and the interactions of SDT's three needs. If the history of English is connected to unequal power in a postcolonial area, students may feel both motivated and unmotivated about learning it (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010)). In their study of Rwanda's language change, they demonstrate that when language rules are suddenly enforced, the three basic psychological needs are impacted and this results in resistance, despite learning English providing many benefits. According to Henry et al.'s (2019) study in Scandinavia, where English is promoted as a tool for worldwide engagement, learners are usually encouraged to be autonomous through student-focused education. This means that educational traditions in each country play a big role in how globalization affects people's minds. Learning multiple languages in today's global society poses many issues for education. To maintain autonomy, teachers should include more learner choices in assignments and support students in managing their online education well. Achieving competence should not only involve standards set by native speakers but also support a diverse view of English and communication abilities over flawless grammar. For relatedness, it's essential to ensure that safe spaces exist for real cultural sharing and to address the stressful side of online exchanges. Current studies by Lamb and Arisandy (2020) point out that a mix of digital and face-to-face activities in language learning is best for the mental health of learners today. Since technology develops and globalization widens, recognizing these psychological factors is still necessary for global EFL motivation.

METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological qualitative approach was employed to explore how globalization influences EFL students' motivation, as such a design allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three beginner-to-intermediate EFL learners, aged 25–30, were purposively selected from a private language institute in Karachi, Pakistan. Each participant had three to five years of formal English instruction and reported engagement with at least one aspect of global culture—such as consuming international media, interacting with foreign peers online, or utilizing English-medium digital platforms. This criterion ensured that all participants had direct exposure to global influences. Participants consented to participate after being informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality safeguards, and each completed a brief screening questionnaire to document demographic details

Data were collected through semi-structured and analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which guided the data-analysis process. Trustworthiness was established through several rigor-enhancing strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of emergent themes with

participants, who confirmed or clarified the researcher's interpretations. Peer debriefing sessions with a colleague facilitated critical reflection on coding decisions and thematic boundaries.

ANALYSIS

In an increasingly interconnected world, globalization has elevated English proficiency to a key determinant of personal identity, professional advancement, and international mobility, shaping why and how learners pursue ESL education. By examining these broad global forces, we can better understand the complex motivational patterns that drive individuals to engage with English learning. This analysis examines the impact of globalization on ESL learners' motivation through two key themes: personal and professional motivation, each with its own subthemes.

Personal Motivation

Globalization has heightened the drive to master English, largely because the language unlocks opportunities for cultural exploration, engagement with international media, and the shaping of a cosmopolitan self-image. The analysis below unpacks three interrelated sub-themes of personal motivation drawn from participant interviews: Cultural Curiosity & Discovery, Direct Access to Global Arts & Media, and Cosmopolitan Identity & Self-Actualization. Each captures an intrinsic, learner-centred impulse rooted in encounters with the wider cultural world.

Cultural Curiosity & Discovery

Among the strongest themes for learning English was, a keen interest in experiencing diverse cultures and global viewpoints. For many participants, English functions as a bridge allowing them to understand, appreciate, and actively engage with a variety of cultural narratives.

Participant A testimonies illustrate this curiosity:

Learning English has become my universal gateway, granting me instant access to diverse cultures around the world. I can explore traditions while I am sitting in my home and can interact with distant communities.

Another participant highlights how English facilitates real-time engagement with world events, strengthening a sense of global connectedness.

I've always wanted myself to travel around the globe someday, visiting places I have only dream about and yes definitely I think English is the starting point to do it, it will give me the chance to experience adventures.

Direct Access to Global Arts & Media

Another key sub theme stems from the desire to consume films, music, books, and games in their original form, free from the filters of dubbing or translation. As English dominates much of the global cultural marketplace, participants view proficiency as the key to an unmediated, original experience of global art and entertainment.

Participant B reflects this in their response:

When the dialogues in a Marvel film come straight from the actors' own voices, that is where the real fun begins, you know what is the point of watching captain America in you know somebody else...voice

A similar response was given by Participant C:

Another reason is that it was always a language that I wanted to learn to speak and communicate with other people to read literature of other people... reading translated editions seems to take the purpose away, it's boring.. yes definitely boring

Self- Actualization and Identity

As a distinct sub-theme, self-actualization and identity provides a key understanding for how English allows learners to reshape their personal narratives and self-concepts. Engaging with global English-speaking communities boosts confidence and enables the formation of hybrid identities that blend cultural heritage with a cosmopolitan outlook. Consequently, English becomes more than a skill where it serves as a catalyst for realizing one's potential and finding belonging in diverse, transnational networks. As a participant states:

I am very happy to be studying English. Since I was a child, I saw my classmates studying English and my parents couldn't afford a course. Today, seeing how much my reading, speaking and writing have improved is very gratifying. In my course, I can already read reports in English and develop something.

Another participant reported a similar narrative where the experience of ESL made them conscious of their identity:

At first.. it felt practical... but gradually, it's changed. It's also about feeling complete, you know..Like, mastering English is making me discover new parts of myself.

Professional Motivation

Whereas personal motives revolve around curiosity and cultural notions, professional motivations stem from the practical demands that globalization places on academic and employment domains. Participants emphasized that English proficiency is essential for career progression, scholarly discourse, and maintaining competitiveness in a connected world. Instrumentally, learners view English competence as key to employability and career mobility, while intrinsically they gain satisfaction from engaging with English medium research and professional discourse.

Employability & Career Mobility

Globalization has reshaped hiring benchmarks, making English a baseline competency across numerous industries. For many learners, mastering the language is no longer a bonus but a prerequisite for upward mobility.

Participant insights make this clear:

I work in supply chain and.. it is not a choice now... it is a requirement where we have to... by any means...we have to...speak in English.. you see communicate by our hearts... and I do try but sometimes I struggle very much

Another participant remarked:

Knowing another language brings us professional and personal opportunities. I would get extremely upset when I came across one foreigner at my work and I had no way to communicate with the same

Academic Visibility & Opportunities

English as a lingua franca of higher education and transnational research shapes the contours of academic opportunity at every stage. Professional opportunities linked with academia provide learners with a hope to join global academic communities with language mastery as essential. Two of the participants reported the same in the following manner:

If I get a good IELTS score...6 or 7...I can apply for scholarships...or I will be just behind

Another participant reported:

My grades were high... but the university did not look at my file until I sent my IELTS result. After they saw I could use English well only after this they checked my scholarship form

Competitive Edge in International Networking

As globalization removes geographic barriers, professional networking increasingly takes place in English, the lingua franca of business and academia. Learners therefore link English fluency directly to their aspirations for cross-border collaboration.

During my meetings i really struggle with technicals... you know those detailed.. you miss some of it and you're gone....Side-lined in fact

Another participant reported that along with professional competitiveness, English as a language helps him to maintain his problem solving ability which in turn helps him to perform better in professional environments:

Currently my motivation is not only professional. On a personal level, after traveling abroad a few times, I am convinced that having a command of another language, even if only partially, brings us peace of mind in relationships and problem-solving

Participant C reported his language motivation in following words:

Despite never having needed it professionally, having worked in a company that I had no relationship with in my day-to-day work , I was interested in working in an agency abroad which did not materialize and now I am desperate to work on my language

Discussion

The results converge on the analytic categories of personal and professional motivation revealing that the global circulation of English produces a layered motivational ecology. Participants consistently described English as simultaneously a medium of cultural participation, a credential for career advancement, and a prerequisite for cross-border movement. This pattern is consonant with mixed-methods evidence that informal digital learning strengthens the ideal L2 self (Liu et al., 2023) and with corporate surveys indicating that employers now treat English as a baseline skill (Pearson, 2024). It also resonates with Self-Determination Theory, which holds that autonomy and competence grow within specific sociocultural nutrients supplied here by the prestige and ubiquity of English (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Personal motivation emerged most vividly in accounts of watching Hollywood films in the original soundtrack and participating in English-mediated chats confirming that engagement with global popular culture fosters an imagined cosmopolitan identity. These narratives extend qualitative work on digital identity construction (García-Pastor, 2018) and reinforce findings that enjoyment in informal environments sustains effort over time (Liu et al., 2023). Nevertheless, several learners reported anxiety about native-speaker norms, echoing critiques that global benchmarks can undermine self-esteem and reproduce linguistic hierarchies (Time Magazine, 2024). Professional motivation and mobility aspirations were intertwined: students viewed English as indispensable for internships, remote work, and postgraduate study, aligning with recent business-communication research that positions English as the contemporary lingua franca of commerce (Oktoma, 2024) and with studies showing employability gains from international experiences (NAFSA, 2023). Yet participants also warned that privileging English risks marginalising local languages, a tension mirrored in research on multilingual inequities in the Global South. Collectively, the data suggest that while global forces generate powerful extrinsic incentives, sustainable motivation requires pedagogies that promote additive multilingualism and position English as an enabling rather than gatekeeping resource.

Several limitations qualify these interpretations. The sample was drawn from a single urban language institute in Karachi and comprised volunteers who may already be positively disposed toward English, thereby limiting transferability to other contexts. The qualitative design privileged depth over breadth, so the salience of themes cannot be generalised statistically. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and mixed-method approaches to trace motivational trajectories across educational stages and to quantify the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Pedagogically, programmes should integrate critical media literacy to temper nativization, embed career-aligned communication tasks that validate local linguistic repertoires, and develop mobility pathways that include reciprocal exchanges rather than one-way flows. Such recommendations may help convert the opportunities of globalisation into motivation that is both enduring and ethically grounded.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that the motivations of EFL students to learn English are deeply intertwined with global processes that extend beyond the classroom. Personal motivation was rooted in a desire to consume global media and participate in transnational peer cultures, underscoring how digital connectedness transforms English into an affective resource for constructing cosmopolitan identities. Professional motivation reflected the learners' perception of English as a prerequisite for employability, networking, and academic visibility in increasingly borderless labour markets. Taken together, these themes reveal a layered motivational ecology in which intrinsic curiosity and instrumental ambitions reinforce one another, but are shadowed by anxiety over native-speaker norms

Although the small sample limits transferability, the findings add scholarly insight into how globalization operates at the level of the individual learner within a linguistically diverse Pakistani context. The study emphasizes the need for future longitudinal and mixed-method investigations capable of tracing motivational trajectories across educational stages and of capturing how global and local forces interact over time. In highlighting the complexity of learners' motivations, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of English-language learning in Global South settings and invites scholars to consider how cosmopolitan aspirations, career imperatives, and mobility dreams converge altogether in shaping sustained engagement with English.

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